

# Opinion

## Are Israelis Losing Their Jewish Identity?

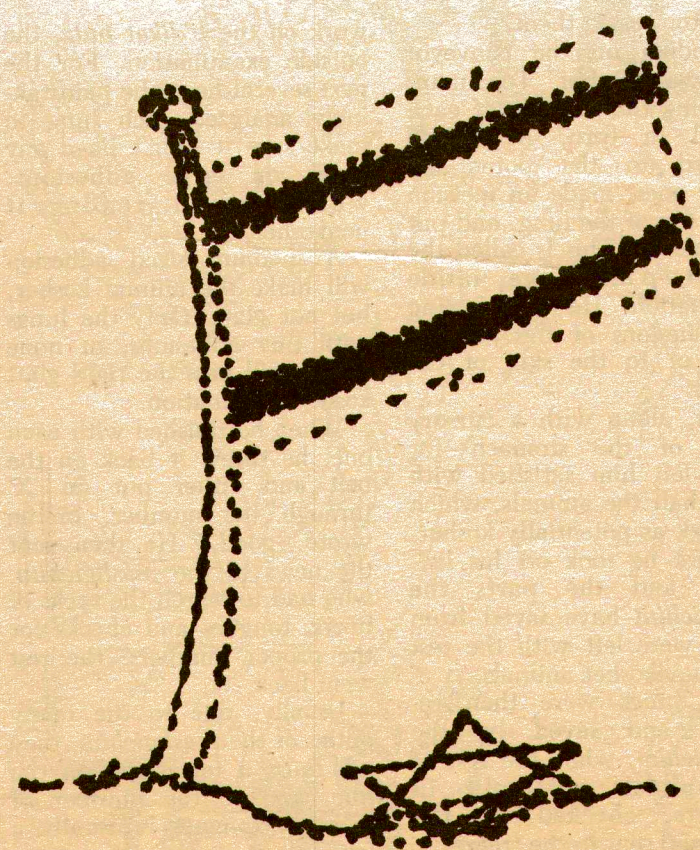
by Mitchell Bard

American Jews have always felt a kinship with Jews living in Israel. Often, we take it for granted that Israelis share the same feeling that we are all *mishpacha*, or family. When I was in Israel recently, I discovered that we may be mistaken.

There is a relatively new phenomenon which is being expressed by the younger generation in Israel. I am referring to Jews who have grown up in Israel, lived through the 1967 and 1973 wars, and have now begun to assert their Israeli nationality.

I was exposed to this attitude in a unique experiment in which participants from the British and American Leadership Training Seminars sponsored by the American Zionist Youth Foundation were brought together for a weekend in Jerusalem with 50 young (ages 19-21) women in the Israel Defense Force. These women were being trained to become officers, and represented the future leaders of the army and Israeli society. We were brought together to join in examining our Jewish identities.

We attended a number of lectures together, but the most interesting discussions occurred when we broke into small groups to consider the question of what diaspora Jews have in common with Israeli Jews. The British and American students stressed their feelings of closeness to the Israelis. They acknowledged they could not completely relate to the IDF officers since they were not in the army and not living through a war, but the diaspora representatives maintained there is a sense of



understanding. We considered ourselves part of the same family.

Most of the Israelis had no such feelings. They found it incomprehensible that the Americans or English could understand what they were going through. This sentiment became particularly apparent when the women expressed their resentment at having to serve in the army while we were able to "enjoy ourselves in universities."

Several members of the LTS group expressed the belief that one could only "truly be Jewish" in Israel. There is a basis for this in Judaism, but most felt this way primarily because of notions of comfort

rather than theology; that is, they felt more comfortable as Jews in a Jewish State where Jewish holidays are recognized and the majority of the population is Jewish.

The officers agreed that one could only be Jewish in Israel and adamantly rejected the suggestion that any of them might one day leave the country. The women wanted to know why those of us who held this belief had not yet made *aliyah* and were unsatisfied by any of the answers they were given.

The rabbi facilitating the discussion pointed out that for most *olim* (immigrants), the novelty of being surrounded by Jews soon wears off. He

also noted the recognition of Jewish holidays is not synonymous with their observance.

One Israeli admitted the holidays were not really observed at her kibbutz. Nevertheless, all the participants refused to discount the importance of these two characteristics of Israel.

Ironically, the overwhelming majority of the Israelis were not observant Jews. This realization was not surprising; however, I was shocked to hear these women identify themselves as Israelis when asked their nationalities. This discrepancy was disconcerting because there has never been an Israeli nationality as it would negate the belief that the Jewish people are a nation. Judaism is composed of both a national and a religious component.

This is a difficult concept to understand because it does not conform to conventional notions of nationality and citizenship, as Menachem Begin explained in 1958: "In Western Europe or the United States, 'nationality' is synonymous with 'citizenship.' A national of a given state is a citizen of that state, or at least one born under its jurisdiction. In central and Eastern Europe, citizenship and nationality are distinct concepts. Nationality there is not something determined by statehood.

"So too, in Israel, citizenship and nationality are distinct. We have Israeli citizens of diverse religions. On the other hand, Jewish nationality and religion must always go together."

The assertion of a distinct Israeli nationality threatens to

create a schism among the Jewish people. This attitude is, in fact, a growing source of instability in Israel.

The most frequent manifestations of this instability are the battles between Israelis favoring greater separation of "church" and state and the religious community which believes the secular notions of the nationalists undermine the constitution of Israel as a Jewish State.

These brief comments are not meant to reflect the attitude of the average Jew. Neither the Israeli IDF officers nor the foreign students are necessarily representative of majority opinions.

Nevertheless, there were some interesting ideas expressed which shattered my preconceptions. The Israelis participating in that seminar did not consider us to be family and that is not a good sign for the future of US-Israel relations.

If the bond between tomorrow's leaders of diaspora Jewry and those of Israel's future leaders are indeed breaking down, we must take steps to reverse the trend. Financial aid is necessary, but, alone, it is not sufficient. Many of the officers felt like mercenaries being paid to fight the diaspora's battle.

What they seem to want is greater emphasis on *aliyah*. I am not sure that is the answer, but there is undoubtedly a need to continue to expand the dialogue with young Israelis so we can recapture the mutual feeling that we are all *mishpacha*.

Mitchell Bard is attending UCLA Law School.

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A group of Nazis surrounded an elderly Berlin Jew and demanded of him, "Tell us, Jew, who caused the war?"

The elderly Jew was no fool. "The Jews," he replied, then added, "And the bicycle riders."

The Nazis were puzzled. "Why the bicycle riders?" they asked.

"Why the Jews?" answered the old man.

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